



OCTOBER 28, 2010

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Larry Malerba, D.O.

Practitioner, educator and leader in the field of holistic medicine

Posted: October 25, 2010 10:06 AM



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Medical Marijuana: The Pros and Cons of Legal Cannabis

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With eight states looking to legalize medical marijuana through legislative initiatives or ballot measures this November (Arizona, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and South Dakota)(1), I wanted to review some of the pros and cons, as I see them, of marijuana use and abuse.

I've considered myself particularly qualified to weigh in on the subject ever since my philosophy professor pointed out to me as a college freshman that the Italian derivation of my name, Mal-er-b-a, can be interpreted to mean "bad weed." I'd like to think that my medical degree and some experience in the field of psychiatry help a little bit, too. To sum up my argument I'll need to borrow a line from Eric Clapton, "It's in the way that you use it."

Medical Marijuana:

The medical benefits of marijuana (cannabis) are pretty well established. There is voluminous scientific research on the subject(2) that verifies its efficacy when applied to a variety of medical conditions, and plenty of first-hand evidence that it works for those who use it for their own health problems. While this first-hand testimony that comes from real patients is usually the type of evidence that scientific purists disparage as "anecdotal," it is, in my opinion, the type of real-life experiential information that we should trust at least as much as the abstract statistical analyses of scientific studies.

The medicinal use of marijuana is well known to be of benefit in the treatment of nausea and other side effects from chemotherapy. It also helps improve the diminished appetite that patients undergoing cancer treatment can experience. It lowers intraocular pressure in glaucoma patients, decreases spasticity and other neurologic symptoms in multiple sclerosis, and there is evidence that it is useful in a variety of additional medical conditions.

Some tend to assume that marijuana first appeared on the scene in the 1960's. However, history tells us that the medicinal properties of cannabis have been recognized for centuries. The medical use of marijuana is documented in Egyptian papyri dating back to 1,550 BCE. It was used in ancient India to treat insomnia, headaches and labor pains. And the ancient Greeks used cannabis for tapeworms, nosebleeds and ear infections.(3)

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Both Cannabis indica and Cannabis sativa have been used worldwide in homeopathic practice since as far back as the early 1800's when detailed information regarding their clinical effects was published. (4) Homeopathic dilutions of these substances have since been found to be particularly effective in treating a wide range of mental/emotional problems including anxiety disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, in addition to urinary tract infections like cystitis and prostatitis.

As far as I am concerned, its value in medical practice in allopathic, herbal and homeopathic forms is an open-and-shut case. Any resistance to its medical use from the mainstream medical community is likely to be a function of political expediency because to reject it on scientific grounds is just plain silly. When we consider that physicians legally prescribe powerful and addictive drugs like morphine, codeine, oxycodone (OxyContin) and hydromorphone (Dilaudid), to name just a few, it is hard to see the justification for outlawing medical cannabis. Nevertheless, there are a number of other contexts in which marijuana is used that we still need to consider.

Ritual Use of Marijuana:

The marijuana plant has likewise been used for centuries in the religious rituals of diverse cultures. Marijuana is just one of many entheogens (en-theo-gen = "within-god-creates"). Entheogenic substances are psychoactive substances used to enhance spiritual experience in religious, shamanic or other spiritual contexts. Cannabis oil was used by early Christians in a number of rites including the anointing with oil at baptisms. The ancient Chinese Taoists used cannabis as incense, and many Hindu practices included offerings of cannabis to their deities. (5) (6)

Some similar but more powerfully hallucinogenic substances used in such rituals include peyote, psilocybin mushrooms, ayahuasca and mescaline. Their common characteristic is their ability to open one up to an experience of the non-physical dimensions of existence. Marijuana users from the sixties generation are quick to point to its consciousness expanding capabilities. Shamans, healers and priests have used and continue to use marijuana in their healing practices and spiritual ceremonies. It is understood to act as a vehicle that provides easier access to and an enhanced experience of the "other side," or the spiritual realm. It opens the consciousness to new possibilities and is a powerful catalyst for spiritual exploration and development. However, once the "doors of perception" (7) have been opened and spiritual insight has been achieved, I do not believe that it is productive or desirable to repeat the process endlessly, since a variety of other means (prayer, meditation, shamanic journeying, chant, etc.) can yield comparable results.

It is interesting to note that the proper use of these entheogenic substances under the guidance of an experienced elder or spiritual adept does not usually result in drug abuse, destructive tendencies or mental illness. The take-home message here is that it is the context within which marijuana is used that is determinative as to its effect. Given that the United States was founded on principles of religious freedom, citizens' rights to use marijuana for spiritual purposes should be a no-brainer.

Recreational Use and Prohibition:

Research indicates that nearly 50 percent of Americans have tried marijuana at least once in their lives. Many find that it enhances creativity, and there is no doubt that it heightens one's aesthetic sensibilities, and one's experience of music in particular. By my count, at least the last three U.S. presidents are known to have tried it. Despite overwhelming evidence that most recreational users of marijuana come away unscathed from their experiences, we are living in a historical period of inordinately harsh laws that prohibit its use.

Criminalization has made countless criminals out of otherwise ordinary citizens. We have allowed fear to motivate us to such an extent that we are willing to throw our kids in jail for something that many of us did during our own periods of youthful indiscretion. The hypocrisy of the contrast between the public face of our collective societal stance against marijuana and our true private attitudes toward the same is unconscionable. Even if young offenders manage to avoid jail sentences, their lives are often stigmatized in such a way as to seriously hamper them from pursuing productive lives as adults. We are two-faced about the issue and kids see right through that. Furthermore, prohibition of popular substances like alcohol and marijuana will always fail because people who desire them will find ways to get their hands on them anyway.

The Hazards of Marijuana Use and Abuse:

Understandably, those who wish to promote the benefits of marijuana can sometimes downplay the negatives. But they shouldn't be glossed over because there are some potential problems that must be named for what they are. Although no one has ever died from a marijuana overdose (8) and its overall track record is remarkably safe, there are some hazards that, again, are largely a function of context. In other words, medical use in the context of professional medical care makes good sense, and ritual use performed with right intent and conscious purpose--ideally under the supervision of an experienced elder--can be an enlightening experience, but recreational use is potentially more problematic because it does have its pitfalls.

We all know the classic stereotype of the burnout pothead wasting his life away contemplating his



Tim Kaine
A Response to Michael Steele:
What Do Republicans Really Stand For?



Adrian Grenier
We're Driving the Bluefin Tuna
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navel while munching on potato chips. As is often the case, there is *some* validity to the stereotype. Used in excess, marijuana has a clear tendency to diminish motivation, blunt ambition and generally stunt normal emotional growth. While it can stimulate the mind it seems to interfere with emotional maturation in some individuals. It can also cause confusion and disorganized thought patterns. No doubt, some individuals can waste away good portions of their lives in a marijuana haze.

Marijuana is well known to be able to induce anxiety disorders, including panic attacks. More rarely, when used by the wrong individuals, it may serve as a trigger for psychotic states, including schizophrenia. I don't believe that it "causes" psychoses as much as it can be the straw that breaks the camel's back for individuals already predisposed to developing such conditions.

The problem with recreational use is that it usually happens in uncontrolled situations with no serious purposeful agenda other than to get "high." Mature experienced individuals can enjoy the benefits of recreational marijuana while avoiding the dangers, especially when used in moderation and with discretion. Many adults similarly engage in responsible social alcohol consumption. As with alcohol, marijuana certainly shouldn't be served to minors.

Where do we go from here?

We have become an irrationally fearful nation that can make some very poor choices regarding our own best interests. As a society, we have abdicated personal responsibility regarding marijuana by inappropriately turning it into a legal issue. In attempting to solve the very complex issues surrounding cannabis use by means of a very black/white, right/wrong legalistic framework, we have created far more problematic issues. Prohibition encourages crime and guarantees a black market, and the casualties of this misguided effort have become our very own children. Decriminalization and/or legalization would go a long way toward crime reduction.

Abusers are not criminals in my opinion; they are persons in need of our help, guidance and compassion. As with alcohol, we must establish reasonable taboos with compassionate responses. (Although I *do* have strong reservations about the way beer commercials promote their products with messages containing images of wild parties, sexual objectification and fantasies of athletic heroism.) There is a reason that alcohol is not sold to those under the age of 21, and the same should apply to marijuana. Offenders should face firm but reasonable penalties and should be offered treatment and support, similar to the way in which a variety of alcohol programs are available to alcohol abusers.

One of my pet theories is that as the adults of my generation have tightened the reigns on alcohol and drug use by instituting much harsher punishments than we experienced as kids, it has left little room for modern kids to push the limits and sow their wild oats. The message is clear: partake of the forbidden at your own peril because the consequences can be severe. Since this has become such a risky option, so my theory goes, kids not surprisingly are turning to the final frontier of rebellion, that of sexual promiscuity. And with such easy access in the age of the internet, our kids are placing themselves in great danger at the hands of sexual predators and in terms of the harm that can come to body, mind and soul as a result of so many indiscriminate, casual sexual encounters.

By setting up more reasonable taboos with less dire consequences, there will be room for our children to occasionally experiment with those boundaries and, when they cross the line, we as a society and as individuals can be there to set them back on course before it is too late. Is it a foolproof strategy? No; there will always be casualties, but they will be far fewer in number. This overall approach is in keeping with the current cries against governmental overreach and allows us to return to the basic principles of freedom of choice and personal responsibility. And as Clapton intones, "So don't you ever abuse it..."

References:

- (1) Medical Marijuana, ProCon.org
- (2) *Research Findings on Medicinal Properties of Marijuana*, MarijuanaLibrary.org
- (3) *Medical Cannabis*, Wikipedia
- (4) Timothy F Allen, MD, *The Encyclopedia of Pure Materia Medica, Vol. II*, Boericke & Tafel, New York, 1875. p. 448
- (5) *Entheogens*, Wikipedia
- (6) *Religious and spiritual use of cannabis*, Wikipedia
- (7) *The Doors of Perception*, Wikipedia
- (8) *Annual Causes of Death in the U.S.*, DrugWarFacts.org

Larry Malerba, DO, DHT is the author of *GREEN MEDICINE: Challenging the Assumptions of Conventional Health Care*, published by North Atlantic Books and distributed by Random House. He has been a practitioner, educator and leader in the field of holistic medicine for more than 20 years.

Pacifica Radio: Dr Malerba discusses GREEN MEDICINE on Global Medicine Review

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basta 54 minutes ago (11:36 AM)

23 Fans

If federal Marijuana convictions are based on non payment of tax (1937 Marijuana Tax Law), once California legalizes pot, can't we just pay the d*mn tax to keep the feds out of our lives?

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Parthenolide 2 hours ago (10:26 AM)

25 Fans

You lost me when you indicated that Homeopathy was effective.

Reply

Permalink | Share it

chmmrx 23 hours ago (1:15 PM)

0 Fans

<http://www.opposingviews.com/i/marijuana-is-the-flame-heroin-is-the-fuse-lsd-is-the-bomb-3>

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smp501 10:06 AM on 10/27/2010

7 Fans

Out of your 'cons' of recreational use, I didn't see one that doesn't also apply to alcohol. The only difference is that there are no alcohol cartels kidnapping and killing people across the Americas.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

topkatnc 6 hours ago (6:40 AM)
386 Fans Follow



Spot on ! ..

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

dsw70 01:27 AM on 10/27/2010
14 Fans Follow



I will smoke, legal or not. It helps with my depression. I am careful with my use. Not driving around. No kids in my household. If it helps with the crappy economy we have here in CA and these drug wars, legalize it. Its natural, an herb.

Reply

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

topkatnc 6 hours ago (6:43 AM)
386 Fans Follow



Count me in too ... I hope Ca . passes it then maybe NC will follow suit ... but I doubt it ..

Reply

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

Mark Montgomery 05:22 PM on 10/26/2010
10 Fans



Medical Marijuana is bringing in about \$55,000 a month in tax revenue in Colorado Springs and has boosted the advertising of one local paper to where they have hired 4 more full timers.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

topkatnc 6 hours ago (6:45 AM)
386 Fans Follow



I read all about Colorado Springs the other day ... and it seems things are going pretty well for them ... I wish the rest of the country would follow ...

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ncmom54 4 hours ago (8:50 AM)

811 Fans

I do hope NC will wake up to the benefits and opportunities.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

docmalerba 11:25 AM on 10/26/2010

18 Fans

While the vast majority of people who smoke marijuana will never develop a serious health issue as a result, there will be some who do. I have examined and treated patients with acute phase marijuana-induced psychoses while working in a psychiatric emergency room, and I have seen a good number of marijuana-induced panic disorders in my private practice over the years.

That being said, I still believe that it is on a par with alcohol. Most use it safely and responsibly, some abuse it to the detriment of their relationships and physical health, and there are those who we know shouldn't go near the stuff.

Given the overall safety record of cannabis, given the crime and devastation wrought by cannabis prohibition, and given its potential therapeutic value in pharmaceutical grade, herbal, and homeopathic forms, I tend to come down on the side of freedom of choice. Either way, there will always be problems but we can disagree on which strategy will result in fewer problems.

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Vern58 10:46 AM on 10/26/2010

22 Fans



I take Marinol, the pharma version of THC, every day to manage side effects of the meds i have to take. Marijuana in it's pure form would be much more effective. Even my Docs admit it. If i had access to it legally I would use it and be much healthier.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

docmalerba 11:34 AM on 10/26/2010

18 Fans

Thanks Vern. I agree that the effects can be completely different depending upon the form used and the context within which it is used.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

anthonytaurus 12:03 PM on 10/26/2010

111 Fans [Follow](#)



The problem with marinol is that it isn't the THC that helps with your issues alone. Marijuana is better because of the CBNs and CBDs which THC naturally degrades into. Those are also the substances that help fight cancer and so on. Marinol doesn't degrade into CBNs and CBDs because it's synthetic THC. Does it even degrade into anything? If it did, what would THAT substance actually be? At least, we know with marijuana.

Marinol is probably the best drug to use if you ONLY want to get high.

The funny thing about marinol is that pharmaceutical companies never had to make marinol. If marijuana were legal, you could easily make a tincture (drink) or use honey oil which can be anywhere from 70% to 99.9% pure. If legalized, it could be guaranteed pure or "medical grade" because people could invest in better equipment. Even without, some guys in Canada managed 99.95 purity.

Also, it could/would cost you much less overall because marijuana is so easy to cultivate. As a grower myself, I could easily harvest 4-6 times per year with a perpetual grow.

Anyway, in the case of a tincture, you could make concentrated THC in an alcohol solution, put a few drops in a glass of orange juice and you're on your way. You would never have to even see a doctor or pharmacist for that. That's why big pharma put their money behind prohibitionist candidates.

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I hate how this article mixes common sense and knowledge with conjecture and fear-mongering. In the "Medical Marijuana" subsection, Malerba says, "The medical benefits of marijuana (cannabis) are pretty well established. There is voluminous scientific research on the subject..." and there's even references.

But, when it comes to the "The Hazards of Marijuana Use and Abuse" subsection, there are no references. There are no facts you can look up. There are no studies to prove the claims. It starts with admitted stereotypes and then supports the same stereotypes with his own conjecture.

There's a reason WE, potheads, downplay the negative effects. It's because, as you and others prove time and time again, YOU CAN'T PROVE IT!

You can prove the benefits as there are thousands of studies around the world to PROVE it. As for centuries of use! NO. Try MILLENNIA of usage around the world. Remember, the oldest marijuana stash, found in China, is some 2,700 years old. That would put marijuana use as far back as 700 BC. But, medical use of marijuana goes back to around 1700 BC in Egypt.

But, where's the proof of these stereotypes?

I have real evidence against those stereotypes. How about my friends and I - web/print designers (2), lawyer, paralegal, office manager, dancer, teachers (5), NYPD officer (2 and more).

Next time we bring up stereotypes, try talking about these LONG-TIME users that exist! No, they are not exceptions! They are the RULE!

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nbb 08:40 AM on 10/26/2010

42 Fans

I would not try to convince Anthonytaurus of something that he apparently believes in so deeply, but for the uninitiated, I'd simply suggest that you go to google and key in marijuana and schizophrenia. There's a lot of material that'll come up. The incidence of schizophrenia is about 1 in 100 worldwide. Typical age of onset for males is late teens, early 20's. My position is that using pot as a teenager is a lot like playing with fire-- or trying Russian roulette. Yes, the numbers are in your favor, but there's all hell to pay if you're unlucky.

This bears no relation to the use of marijuana as it relates to chemo. I don't claim to know anything about that. But for the young recreational user, you might want to think again, while you still can think.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

anthonytaurus 09:32 AM on 10/26/2010
111 Fans [Follow](#)



siiiiiiiiigh

Make sure that you understand the difference between causation and correlation. It's the very reason no one can actually reference an article or study in this issue.

The question is, does marijuana cause or trigger psychotic episodes or do those that are already psychotic have a preference for marijuana use?

But, even then, that makes it seem as though there is some relation between marijuana use and psychosis which isn't true. Perhaps, since a large portion of this nation uses marijuana, some people who are predisposed to psychosis also use.

Maybe, the case is not that marijuana causes/triggers psychosis at all; the "authorities" FORCE a connection between marijuana use and psychosis as part of the overall fear campaign.

It's like the Tulane/Heath study which "proved" marijuana destroys braincells! The DEA touted this scientific study and it turned out out to be 100% false.

The DEA and others are touting this psychosis link and there's NO proof outside of "these people use marijuana, see what happened" conjecture.

Instead of asking people to google something, why don't you provide the link yourself and explain it? You can explain the general incidence rate of schizophrenia around the world but don't want to say anything about how it correlates with marijuana use? Go figure.

And, this will always be the problem with fear mongers! You allude to something scary but you provide no real argument, no proof, nothing to debate on!

Marijuana causes/triggers psychosis??? PROVE IT!!!

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nbb 06:52 AM on 10/26/2010

42 Fans

There's a national leader in NAMI-- that's the National Alliance on Mental Illness-- a grassroots organization of people who have serious and persistent mental illness AND family members. One of the prominent members, a professional in the field, gave strong testimony about the potential for smoking marijuana to precipitate psychosis, schizophrenia in particular. Obviously if someone doesn't have the genetic predisposition to the illness, there will not be this result. Remarkably, this man said that if you want to use street drugs, you're probably better off doing crack or cocaine than smoking marijuana in terms of setting off mental illness.

Very unfortunately I know schizophrenia muxh too well from life-changing experience. Not my life, but a much loved and previously very capable family member. Pay heed to the paragraph in the article that reads:

Marijuana is well known to be able to induce anxiety disorders, including panic attacks. More rarely, when used by the wrong individuals, it may serve as a trigger for psychotic states, including schizophrenia. I don't believe that it "causes" psychoses as much as it can be the straw that breaks the camel's back for individuals already predisposed to developing such conditions.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

jgarma 08:40 PM on 10/25/2010

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Lead by people like Jim Simpson, people are growing marijuana and making an oil from it. It's then digested, about two drops a day, to help with a variety of health issues, including cancer.

I haven't seen much science about it, but there are many testimonials from former sick people now well.

More here:

<http://www.garmaonhealth.com/2010/07/hemp-oil-cancer-cure/>

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

anthonytaurus 08:09 AM on 10/26/2010

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You're talking about a tincture.

<http://www.cannabisculture.com/articles/3005.html>

Hemp or Honey oil is actually smoked.

<http://www.cannabisculture.com/articles/3083.html>

I use the isopropyl alcohol wash or iso-wash technique.

Both processes basically strip the THC from the plant material.

The science behind it is that THC is not water soluble but it is alcohol soluble (tincture and oils) and fat soluble (cooking) which is why it stays in the body for so long.

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Mister Anonymous 10:29 AM on 10/26/2010

2 Fans

It's Rick Simpson, actually. Here is his website. I'm interested too. But, somebody will make him out as a guy who "just wants to get high".

<http://www.phoenixtears.ca/>

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

anthonytaurus 11:46 AM on 10/26/2010

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What are you interested in?

Simpson is not the only person doing this nor is he the source of this method. Thousands of people get their marijuana through this process or another. I've done it before. I could answer your questions.

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Amy Cavanaugh 04:00 PM on 10/25/2010

15 Fans

You and Sarah Palin want pot according to Newsweek

<http://www.newsweek.com/2010/10/25/the-conservative-case-for-legalizing-pot.html>

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MalcolmKyle 03:23 PM on 10/25/2010

16 Fans

The WHO survey of 17 countries finds that the United States has the highest usage rates for nearly all illegal substances.

In the U.S. 42.4 percent admitted having used marijuana. The only other nation that came close was New Zealand, another bastion of get-tough policies, at 41.9 percent. No one else was even close. The results for cocaine use were similar, with the U.S. again leading the world by a large margin.

Even more striking is what the researchers found when they asked young adults when they had started using marijuana. Again, the U.S. led the world, with 20.2 percent trying marijuana by age 15. No other country was even close, and in Holland, just 7 percent used marijuana by 15 -- roughly one-third of the U.S. figure.

<http://www.alternet.org/drugs/90295/>

In 1998, the US Drug Czar General Barry McCaffrey claimed that the U.S. had less than half the murder rate of the Netherlands. That's drugs, he explained. The Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics immediately issued a special press release explaining that the actual Dutch murder rate is 1.8 per 100,000 people, or less than one-quarter the U.S. murder rate.

Here is a very recent article by a psychiatrist from Amsterdam, exposing Drug Czar misinformation <http://tinyurl.com/247a8mp>

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

docmalerba 06:19 PM on 10/25/2010

18 Fans

Very nice use of stats Malcolm. Thank you. I tend to agree that suppression (prohibition) only creates more of the very same thing that one is trying to eradicate. Paradoxically, if we were to ease up the pressure, the penalties for breaking the taboo would be less dramatic, and those who are compelled to do so could give it a try and move on instead of winding up like criminals.

Reply

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basta 02:58 PM on 10/25/2010

23 Fans

The argument about whether weed is bad for you or good for you is really irrelevant to the legalization issue. Should we outlaw Big Macs? They are obviously bad for you. What's important is to stop wasting people's time and lives trying to enforce laws that only create a criminal underworld. If you think that suddenly everybody is going to get stoned and that every other driver on the freeway will be loaded, think again.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

vagabond78666 03:47 PM on 10/25/2010

14 Fans



but the people that argue against legalization truly feel that smokers are a threat to society...the ignorance is frustrating, to say the least

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TxGrandma FourTwenty 01:09 AM on 10/26/2010

65 Fans

I would say then they have not done their research. Ignorance is not an excuse for being stupid. Why in the hell would we not want it legal? What is so threatening. Alcohol is 10 x threatening with no medicinal qualities. What about tobacco? If it were so threatening then why are all the past police chiefs, judges, senators, congressman now coming out and saying they want it legal? Because they know the business.

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15 Fans

@ the commenter that mentioned lung cancer, most people using MM for medical purposes do not smoke it.

I am passionate about MEDICAL marijuana-however the more I get involved in the "movement" it is apparent that it is made up largely people who want overall legalization Also, it should be called PRESCRIPTION Marijuana. The delivery models that allow you to grow your own make no sense whatsoever. When I was undergoing chemo-I couldnt walk across the room let alone start a garden. Plus if you have two months to live and they give you seeds that take three months to grow.....

It seems to be by and for young people when the diseases it is most effective with generally afflict older people. Until the movement has a buy in from conventional medicine (most treat it like snake oil) and people who know the political process it will continue to fail as it has in most states. The biggest supporters of MM are the tea party set because it showcases state rights, so I guess the question is would a supporter vote for Sarah Palin to expedite its passage?

In Florida 63% support MM according to Sen. Don Gaetz, chair of the Senate health committee, no member of the Florida Senate has contacted him and asked that a medical marijuana bill be placed on the agenda nor did he receive any request from the medical community or patients to change in the law.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

FreedomFreedomFreedom 04:45 PM on 10/25/2010

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Marijuana has no link to lung cancer. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/25/AR2006052501729.html>

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docmalerba 06:49 PM on 10/25/2010

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I agree Amy that many of those looking to decriminalize/legalize marijuana need to take a more serious approach than to simply assert that it's one's God given right to get high. And until legislators find the courage to do the right thing rather than what they think is the politically advantageous thing, it will be difficult to set up a sound and sensible system of medical marijuana delivery.

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